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Just over five years ago, a Saudi-financed center for interfaith relations opened in Vienna amid concern it might be a public relations fig leaf for a country often slammed for its lack of religious freedom.

Since then, the reformist Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who could reign over the desert kingdom for decades if he takes over as planned from his elderly father King Salman, has raised hopes that the tight grip of the ultraconservative religious establishment on the country is loosening.

In October, Salman, 32, said he wants to return his country to "a moderate Islam open to the world and all religions."

This cautious opening has been a boon to the Saudi-backed King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue, or KAICIID, in Vienna. Its mission to improve relations between religious groups sounds more credible now that its main backer is starting to open up.

Staunchly conservative Saudi Arabia, which prohibits the construction of churches and synagogues, has long been anything but moderate in religion. Especially in recent decades, it has enforced strict limits on women's rights, banned cinemas and other public entertainment and tightly controlled religious activity by any faith other

than its official Wahhabi Islam.

That has been changing under the crown prince's Vision 2030 reform program that aims to wean Saudi Arabia off its economic dependence on oil, diversify its economy and roll back the ultraconservative religious hierarchy's near veto power over domestic and foreign policies.

In Vienna, after a rocky start, the interfaith center has launched several programs promoting harmony among world faiths and seen Riyadh starting to get into step with its message. This has helped establish it as a serious player in interfaith dialogue.

"It took us some time to build up trust, to break down psychological barriers and have the stakeholders accept us," KAICIID's Secretary General Faisal bin Abdulrahman bin Muaammar told Religion News Service during a recent conference in Vienna.

"We went through good times and bad times in the past five years, but in this year I think we started receiving the fruit of what we planted," he said. "King Salman and Prince Mohammed have a strategy to move Saudi Arabia ahead and we are benefiting from this."

Mohammed bin Salman, who is now on a diplomatic tour of Europe and is due to visit the United States March 19-22, unveiled the Vision 2030 reforms in 2016.

In an interview with London's Guardian newspaper, he said that Saudi Arabia had turned ultraconservative in reaction to the 1979 Islamic Revolution in nearby Shiite Iran and was "not normal" since then.

During that period, Riyadh tightly policed its puritanical Wahhabi version of Sunni Islam at home and exported it to Muslim communities abroad by bankrolling mosques, imams and schools that many Western governments suspect may have spread extremist views.

In recent months, the kingdom has reined in its notorious religious police, reopened its once-banned movie theaters and announced women would soon be able to drive. It is still very conservative, but it is starting to evolve.

Lebanese Maronite Patriarch Bechara Boutros Al-Rahi, one of the high-level participants at the February 26-27 conference, said he discussed the reform plan

with the crown prince in November.

The patriarch's trip to Riyadh was itself a rare act of openness for Saudi Arabia, which hosts Islam's holiest sites and bans the public practice of other faiths.

"It will take time and it won't be easy," said Al-Rahi, an Eastern Rite Catholic who is also a cardinal. "But the fact that a patriarch is invited by the king and treated like a head of state is already a sign that things are changing."

Rabbi David Rosen, who represents Judaism on KAICIID's board of directors, said he also expected to be invited to Saudi Arabia for a meeting of the board there. "It should happen sometime soon," he said.

The Vatican's representative, Bishop Miguel Ayuso Guixot, said the changes in Saudi Arabia so far were timid but positive and could help the many Christians working there. They cannot now have churches and must worship in private quarters.

"We are happy to hear that the social discourse shows openness and a willingness to change Saudi society," he said. "We have to be positive."

A subtle but significant sign of change was the way senior Middle Eastern Islamic leaders at the conference backed its goal of "promoting peaceful coexistence and common citizenship." That wording implies equal rights for religious minorities, not the second-class "dhimmi" status that was supposed to protect them in Muslim societies.

The grand imam of Mecca, grand muftis of Egypt, Lebanon and Jerusalem, the heads of the Muslim World League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation as well as Riyadh's deputy Islamic affairs minister all attended and addressed the conference.

Skepticism was widespread in 2012 when KAICIID opened its doors in the refurbished Sturany Palace, just down Vienna's elegant Ring Road from the headquarters of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, saying it wanted to promote understanding among religions.

Critics dismissed it because of Saudi Arabia's dismal record on religious freedom and local politicians charged it might be used to spread radical Islam in Austria. Senior officials of other religions who signed on as directors and advisers openly said they would quit if they felt they were being manipulated.

The center went through a crisis in 2015 when former Austrian Justice Minister Claudia Bandion-Ortner, its deputy head, tried to play down public criticism of the flogging of a dissident Saudi blogger by saying the Saudis "don't chop off heads every Friday."

She soon had to step down and Austria temporarily considered withdrawing its sponsorship. But KAICIID survived and focused its work more on fostering local interfaith dialogues.

In recent years, it has brought together leaders of 16 Muslim and Christian religious faculties across the Middle East to work on a common curriculum for training students in interreligious dialogue.

Its International Fellows Program provides a yearlong training in dialogue for about 45 educators from different faiths to make them multipliers of the message.

"For most, it was the first time to meet someone of faiths they knew nothing about, or to visit their houses of worship," said 2016 fellow Rabbi Jeff Berger of Montefiore College in London.

KAICIID has also involved itself in what one participant called "the toughest cases," trying to promote dialogue across tense religious lines in Nigeria, Myanmar and the Central African Republic.

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In Europe, it is helping Muslim and Jewish leaders form a joint council to lobby against governments that want to ban circumcision or ritual halal and kosher slaughter.

The Vienna conference included the official launch of a pioneering "platform" to foster interreligious contacts in the Arab world, with KAICIID pledging to develop programs to promote dialogue among faiths — mainly Muslims and Christians — in the region.

KAICIID is officially an international organization with Saudi Arabia, Austria and Spain as its sponsors and the Holy See as a "founding observer." Riyadh initially funded it for the first three years and has continued since then.

"The support we are getting from King Salman and the crown prince is unlimited, financially and politically," bin Muaammar said, adding that Riyadh's reforms were an additional boost.

Kowthar Musa Alarbash, a Saudi blogger and member of the kingdom's advisory Shura Council, said the Vision 2030 program "sped up some legislation that might have taken 50-60 years to see the light."

"Nowadays, the moderate voices are much louder than the extremist voices," she said. "There will always be opposition, but it won't have the same effect as it would have had years ago because the moderate voices are the louder ones now."

An Arab Christian cleric, requesting anonymity to avoid appearing overly critical, welcomed the Saudi reforms and the boost they gave to KAICIID, but insisted they had to be seen in context.

"Remember, this is the 21st century and they're just getting around to talking about letting women drive," he said.